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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ADDIS ABABA 000557

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: PRIME MINISTER MELES ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND
DEMOCRACY

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto
Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: Ambassador and Prime Minister Meles discussed on February 21 the return of NDI and other USG sponsored programs to build the capacity of the anticipated new National Electoral Board as the nation prepares for local elections. The PM also remarked that it is important not to impose foreign notions of democracy on nations like Ethiopia, but rather to nurture and develop receptivity to democratic values, which would prove more effective over the long-term. The PM reiterated his willingness to support efforts by distinguished Ethiopian elders to grant clemency to detained opposition leaders before a court decision. In exchange, the PM wants a promise by the detainees to respect the constitution and the peaceful political process. He also wants the detainees to express remorse for their actions that contributed to the violence after the 2005 election, and in return, they would be permitted to participate in politics again. The EU Ambassador's efforts to re-direct the work of the Ethiopian elders is proving to be counter-productive and could deep-six their efforts. END SUMMARY.

NDI AND DEMOCRACY

¶2. (S) Following a meeting with House Intelligence Chairman Representative Reyes and his delegation on February 21, Prime Minister Meles met privately with the Ambassador for over an hour to discuss human rights and democracy issues. The Ambassador followed-up on Secretary Albright's January 2007 visit and request, as a Board member of NDI, to have NDI return to Ethiopia. The PM agreed with the Ambassador to consider allowing NDI to play a role in supporting capacity building of the soon-to-be-announced, newly formed National Electoral Board (NEB). International support would help the NEB in preparation for local elections at the end of the year.

¶3. (S) The Ambassador requested, and the PM agreed, to break the logjam on an IFES representative seeking to come to Addis to work for the AU. The PM saw no problem and post will work with the AU to ensure the representative receives his Ethiopian visa to begin work at the AU.

¶4. (S) The Ambassador and PM discussed at length the latter's views on democracy. The PM said democracy cannot be forced

on a nation, and that it must rather be nurtured. Receptivity for democracy must be promoted. Meles pointed to Saudi Arabia as an example where efforts to force democracy have failed. He stressed the importance of developing democracy in Saudi Arabia, though, given the country's strong influence in the region.

DETAINEE RELEASE: POSSIBLE, BUT MAYBE NOT PROBABLE

15. (S) Much of the discussion with the PM centered on the U.S. Mission's priority to secure the release of high-profile detainees - the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) opposition leaders who have now served over thirteen months in prison. On the recommendation of Ambassador Huddleston in August 2006, Prime Minister Meles and the detainees began a dialogue through a group of respected Ethiopian "elders": Professor Ephraim Isaac, an esteemed scholar who has taught at Harvard and Princeton; Haile Gebreselassie, Olympic Marathon gold medalist; and Ambassador Bekele Endeshaw, current National Chairman of the Peace and Development Committee. The opening for the elders was Prime Minister Meles' willingness to grant clemency to the detainees prior to any judgment by the courts, thus allowing the detainees to return to political life. In exchange, the elders have tried to negotiate with the detainees a commitment to abide by and work within the constitution, as well as an expression of remorse for actions that may have contributed to the violence after the historic (and remarkably free and open) national parliamentary elections of May 15, 2005.

16. (S) Prime Minister Meles noted that his offer remained, but expressed doubt that the detainees would accept the

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conditions under which clemency would be granted. The PM wants a commitment by the detainees not to try to overthrow the government and their promise to abide by and work within the constitution, enhancing a peaceful and stable political process clearly defined under the constitution. The PM asked for a statement from the detainees to the elders, not to him, expressing remorse for their actions which contributed to the violence after the 2005 elections.

17. (S) The dialogue was proceeding positively through the beginning of the new year. The PM noted that in the past month, the detainees have become more resistant in meeting the conditions for clemency. The PM noted the efforts by the EU Ambassador to have criminal charges against the detainees dropped and lesser charges filed instead. In a separate conversation, the EU Ambassador told the Ambassador in private, and without the concurrence of the other European member state ambassadors, that the best resolution was not the course being pursued by the elders. Rather, he suggested changing their focus toward having the charges dropped and lesser ones applied. He felt that this would be more fair and would permit the detainees to be released on bail. The EU Ambassador noted that the detainees bear responsibility, along with the government, for contributing to the violence and disorder after the 2005 elections. The EU Ambassador argued, however, that this was a far lesser crime than the charges the detainees currently face. The Ambassador replied that such an approach would delay the judicial process and might prevent the detainees from returning to political life if convicted on lesser charges.

18. (S) The PM clearly stated to the Ambassador that withdrawal of charges and the application of lesser charges was not an option under the judicial process. It would unnecessarily lengthen the process and it is not clear that additional, more serious charges would not be levied. It is also not clear that bail would be granted by the courts. The quickest route to resolution was the efforts by the elders. The Ambassador remarked to the PM that the U.S. Mission strongly supported the efforts by Ethiopian elders, a

traditional and respected conflict resolution process. Any undercutting of the elders, as suggested by the EU Ambassador, would derail the current process.

19. (S) The PM remarked that the EU Ambassador and that of other European Ambassadors to "adjust" and change the course taken by the elders has contributed to the detainees changing their position on any letter of admission of guilt to contributing to the violence (even though the letter will go only to the elders and not to the PM). The PM believes the detainees are hoping that the EU will somehow get the detainees out of jail. Professor Ephraim will return to Ethiopia the week of February 26 in a last ditch effort to secure agreement from the detainees along the lines the elders have pursued. Further, the elders will meet with the EU Ambassador to get him to stand down and allow their current approach to proceed.

110. (S) COMMENT: The U.S. Embassy sees the efforts by the Ethiopian elders as the only way for success on the detainee issue. It is an Ethiopian approach to resolve an Ethiopian problem. We will work closely to support Professor Ephraim's efforts and, if necessary, coordinate in getting the EU to back down and allow the Ethiopian process to proceed. END COMMENT.
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